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ABSTRACT

Investigated were the perceptions of programs for children with specific learning disabilities (SLD) expressed by 127 directors of special education programs, supervisors of SLD programs, and principals having SLD classes located in large, medium sized, or small Florida school districts. The administrators were queried regarding the characteristics of SLD pupils, reasons for referral, eligibility criteria, prevalence of SLD, the influence of psychologists, tests used for SLD identification, criteria for self contained placement, differential placement, and use of resource rooms. It is concluded that the Florida SLD eligibility criteria should continue to be used and clarified in order to standardize identification and placement procedures, that the accepted prevalence rate should be increased to at least 3%, that the training of SLD teachers should include preparation in testing and consultative work, and that SLD teachers and resource rooms be provided for those pupils on waiting lists. (DB)

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ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF SELECTED ASPECTS OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES PROGRAMS IN FLORIDA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

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Because of differing perceptions regarding the characteristics of SLD pupils, different standards exist for the identification of these pupils, and for their placement in SLD classes. Cruickshank (1972) noted that the field of specific learning disabilities was at a point in its growth where assessment of all of its components should be undertaken. He considered the field to be at its most critical phase because it could not continue to grow as it has in the past without expecting failure in the form of professional frustrations, political hostility, and parental antagonism.

Divoky (1974) expressed alarm at the rate at which the SLD field is growing. Teacher training programs, regional and national conferences, journals, books, organizations for teachers and parents, and treatment centers have proliferated.

Myers (1974), in her president's message in the DCLD newsletter, wrote that the most serious problem confronting individuals in the areas of specific learning disabilities was that of not being able to define operationally what is meant by a "specific learning disability." She asked whether individuals were any closer to such a definition than they were five years ago, and questioned the likelihood of adequate identification of pupils without operationalizing the definition. Myers pointed out that when operations are not stated, there can be little reliable identification of the population, nor can valid conclusions be reached regarding the prevention and remediation of specific learning disabilities.

Cruickshank (1972) examined issues which he considered to be threats to the appropriate development of the field of specific learning disabilities.

He too mentioned the failure to define operationally the term "learning disability." He also mentioned the lack of qualified college professors; the lack of properly trained teachers and quality programs for children; the lack of parent involvement, and the threat of class actior suits. Court actions taken in such cases as Hobson vs. Hansen (1967) and Spangler vs. Pasadena City Board of Education (1970) were pertinent to the education of pupils with specific learning disabilities because they challenged three aspects of special education applicable to the SLD field (Cruickshank, 1972). The three aspects to which Cruickshank referred were educational placement and labeling, "psychodiagnosis," and parental involvement in the educational process. The plaintiffs in these cases were dissatisfied with the schools and stated that the psychologists and educators had violated the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, and had deprived citizens of the equal protection clause under the laws.

Judge J. Skelly Wright handed down the opinion in Hobson vs. Hansen (1967) which abolished the track system in Washington, D. C. Most of the children in special education classes as well as many disadvantaged children, had been placed in the lowest track. In Spangler vs. Pasadena City Board of Education (1970), the court also spoke to the issue of placement of pupils in ability groups and urged that the grouping policies of the districts be carefully examined. In the Hobson case, the courts agreed with the plaintiffs that the public school personnel who administered the tests used for ability grouping had not been adequately trained for that purpose.

Larry P. vs. Riles (1972) was a leading proceeding in which the plaintiffs sought a preliminary injunction which would restrain the San Francisco

school district from administering I. Q. tests for the purpose of determining placement of black pupils in classes for the educable retarded. District Judge Peckham indicated that in the view of the court, irreparable harm takes place when pupils are wrongfully placed in EMR classes. He questioned whether some pupils, including the plaintiffs in this case, were wrongfully placed in such classes, in violation of their constitutional rights (Collings & Singletary, 1973).

Cruickshank (1972) warned that legal cases directed at the education for the retarded were very relevant to children with specific learning disabilities. Until the needs of children labeled learning disabled are met, the professionals in the field are vulnerable to the growing demands for accountability.

Divoky (1974) warned educators against making a commitment to the expansion of SLD programs and facilities until the following questions can be answered: (a) How reliable are our diagnostic tools and screening methods, and how applicable are their results?, (b) Are the characteristics of learning disabled children unique to this group, or do successful students have at least some disabilities?, (c) Are current methods of treatment and remediation valid?

In light of the concerns of Cruickshank (1972), recent court cases and Divoky's warnings against the expansion of SLD programs and facilities, an investigation of Florida's SLD programs was undertaken. This study was an initial attempt to provide information about what was happening in SLD programs in selected Florida school districts, as perceived by those individuals having administrative influence on SLD programs, namely directors of exceptional education programs, supervisors of SLD programs and elementary school principals having SLD classes in their schools.

School districts were chosen according to the size of their school populations. All of Florida's seven large districts (30,000 and over) were chosen. Seven of the eight districts classified as medium (18,000 - 30,000) were chosen. Seven small districts (below 18,000) were selected. Small districts were chosen which had at least six SLD classes, and priority was given to those districts which also had SLD supervisors.

All of the 21 directors and all SLD supervisors of these districts were included in the sample. Seven principals having SLD classes were randomly selected from each district. One district had only six SLD classes. All of the principals in this district were included in the sample. The breakdown of the sample and the number of respondents were as follows:

	Included in Sample	Responded
Directors of exceptional education programs	21	16
Supervisors of SLD programs	13	10
Principals having SLD classes	147	101

By completing the questionnaires which had been revised in accordance with the results of field testing, the respondents provided the information which answered the questions regarding their perceptions of identification and placement procedures used in their respective districts.

Directors, supervisors, and principals appeared to be more concerned with academic functioning than they were with isolated perceptual, language, or motor characteristics when identifying the SLD pupil. Dunn (1973) mentioned the problems with the USOE definition which the state of Florida had accepted. He feared that the definition referred to a "miscellaneous" group of children

and conditions rather than to a classical syndrome or common characteristic. An analysis of the responses from supervisors indicated that the pupil with a specific learning disability is perceived as having a condition in which no learning trait is characteristic unless it is accompanied by other traits.

CHARACTERISTICS

Principals were the most outspoken in what they considered the characteristics of SLD pupils to be. They tended to describe certain traits as being always characteristic, or a very good indication that a learning disability exists. Directors and especially supervisors were more cautious in naming certain traits as being always a characteristic, or very characteristic of the SLD pupil. It is possible that directors and supervisors allow for greater variation in what is considered to be normal learning behavior in order to be selective in placing pupils in special education classes. They may be more accustomed than principals to insisting upon sufficient evidence to justify special placement.

Dunn (1968) alerted special educators to the dangers of inaccurate placement of students in special education classes. His argument was that past practices had as their major justification, the removal of pressures on regular teachers and pupils. Dunn's concern may still be a problem today. Principals may describe certain traits as being very characteristic of the SLD pupil because of a tendency to want to remove the pressures on regular teachers and pupils with learning problems in their classes.

Although directors, supervisors, and principals weighed the traits differently, there was agreement among the groups that the following traits were characteristic of SLD pupils: (a) persistent reversals of words, syllables, or letters in reading and writing; (b) difficulty in

organizing space; (c) poor visual discrimination; (d) poor memory for visual sequencing; and (e) difficulty in following directions, understanding class discussion, or retaining auditory information. Few of the respondents, however, perceived hyperactivity, emotional problems, or general coordination deficits to be associated with SLD pupils.

REFERRAL

Regarding reasons for referral to SLD programs, the respondents reported that pupils were usually referred to SLD programs because they demonstrated a significant discrepancy between achievement and potential, and an uneven pattern of achievement in reading, writing and spelling. These descriptors were considered to be always characteristic of SLD pupils by directors, supervisors and principals.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Most of the districts were using the guidelines designed by the Florida Bureau for Education of Exceptional Children for the identification of pupils with specific learning disabilities (District Procedures, 1975). These guidelines were formulated because of problems with the 1968 USOE definition which the state of Florida accepted. One of the problems with the definition according to Dunn (1973), was its lack of restrictions regarding the severity of the learning disability for placement purposes. The Florida guidelines were developed in order to operationalize the definition of the National Advisory Committee and to make SLD eligibility more objective.

Although many professionals reported that the Florida SLD guidelines needed more clarification, most agreed that the criteria used in the definition were adequate at this time. Apparently, the respondents have found

the eligibility criteria suggested in the guidelines to be consistent with their own opinions regarding the pupil with specific learning disabilities. The agreement of the respondents regarding the acceptance of the eligibility criteria should lead to similar standards for identification and placement procedures throughout Florida school districts. It is important to realize that the eligibility criteria used in the Florida guidelines depend upon adequate evaluations of the pupils to be placed in SLD classes. Without sufficient and adequately trained teachers, it will be impossible for districts to adhere to the eligibility criteria for SLD placement.

PREVALENCE

Administratively, it is important to note that 43 percent of the directors and 33 percent of the supervisors reported that their districts had a greater prevalence rate than the state-recommended rate of 1-2 percent. Seventy-one percent of the directors and 80 percent of the supervisors wanted the state-recommended rate to be increased. Prevalence rates from 3-5 percent were recommended by directors and supervisors. According to the opinions of Florida directors and supervisors, many pupils will not be served if the state of Florida adheres to a 1-2 percent prevalence rate. If the rate were to be increased, there would be a need for more qualified SLD teachers, more university training opportunities for SLD teachers, and resource classes in every school so that schools which have previously not had their own resource classes would be able to accommodate their own pupils.

PSYCHOLOGISTS' INFLUENCE

Thirty-one percent of the directors and 21 percent of the principals reported that they were not satisfied with psychologists' influence in determining SLD placement. Supervisors reported their dissatisfaction by expressing

the opinion that I.Q. tests were not sufficient for the purpose of making recommendations for SLD programs, and that the evaluations of SLD teachers were equally important to such a recommendation. Attitudes of supervisors, directors, and principals which expressed the opinion that the psychologist had too much influence, may change as the districts have more experience with eligibility criteria for placement, and as the SLD teacher assumes more responsibility for testing. It should be remembered that until recently tests administered by psychologists were often the only tests used to determine SLD placement.

TESTS

The tests which were most often used for SLD identification, and which were sometimes required for placement, in order of usage were: The Detroit Tests of Learning Aptitude (Baker, 1935); The Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (McCarthy & Kirk, 1961); The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (Wechsler, 1974); The Wide Range Achievement Test (Jastak & Jastak, 1965); The Bender Visual Motor Gestalt Test (Bender, 1945); The Peabody Individual Achievement Test (Dunn & Markwardt, 1970); and The Key Mathematics Diagnostic Test (Connolly, Nachtman, & Pritchett, 1971).

Cruickshank (1972) warned special educators that SLD programs should not continue to expand until the professionals responsible for educating SLD pupils have been adequately trained. Since SLD teachers were doing most of the assessment of pupils, with the exception of psychological tests, it is essential that they be adequately prepared to administer educational tests either in their university training, or through supervised in-service training. Directors and principals expressed the opinion that the SLD teacher is very influential in determining SLD placement. The training of SLD teachers should

carefully prepare them for the responsibilities they will have in identification and placement.

SELF-CONTAINED PLACEMENT

Although there were no objective criteria used for placing pupils in self-contained classes when resource classes were also available, it was learned that pupils were more likely to be placed in a self-contained class than in a resource class if they (a) had a serious language disorder; (b) needed help in most academic areas; (c) were very young (first or second grade) or (d) had emotional problems. Directors, supervisors, and principals reported that self-contained placement was most influenced by the second factor, i.e. the need for assistance in most academic areas.

Most of the respondents agreed that resource room programming was ideal for most SLD pupils, however 50 percent of the directors, 51 percent of the principals, and 30 percent of the supervisors not having self-contained classes in their districts, wanted them to be added to their program. This expression of need for self-contained classes was of interest since special educators are in a period characterized by a thrust toward mainstreaming. According to the opinions of many of the professionals involved in SLD placement, there is still a definite need for self-contained classes.

DIFFERENTIAL PLACEMENT

Sometimes it is difficult to make a decision regarding placement because a pupil does not clearly fit the criteria for SLD placement or the criteria for other special education placement. In some instances, a class for the emotionally disturbed, or for the educable retarded might be also considered

in a staffing. Under these circumstances, the following informal criteria may help to determine SLD placement according to the opinions of directors, supervisors, and principals: (a) parental preference for SLD placement; (b) the socio-economic or cultural background of the pupil, i.e., the pupil may test low on standardized tests because of test bias; (c) preference for a resource program when other special education classes are self-contained, and (d) the lack of stigma associated with SLD placement.

The socio-economic or cultural background of the pupil was considered to be the factor which most often influenced differential placement when a case was considered to be borderline. Professionals may be questioning their previous concepts regarding intelligence and may be recognizing intellectual aptitudes which may be culturally determined. Although special educators and general educators may realize the injustice of placing culturally different pupils in classes for the educable retarded, they may feel justified in placing these same pupils in self-contained SLD classes. Dunn (1968) wrote that a better alternative to special class placement is needed for socio-culturally different children with mild learning problems, and recommended that one or more resource teachers be available at every school to work with these children.

RESOURCE ROOMS

It is essential that adequate requirements be met for resource room placement to be effective. The use of resource rooms is consistent with the concept of mainstreaming because resource rooms permit a pupil to remain with his peers for most of the school day. Directors, principals, and supervisors agreed that the following factors helped to make resource room placement effective for pupils with specific learning disabilities; (a) when the pupil needs help in only one or two academic areas; (b) when the pupil can work independently in

the regular class; (c) when the regular classroom teacher was understanding of the pupil's learning problems; (d) when the pupil mixed well with his peers in the regular classroom; (e) when regular classroom phasing in certain academic subjects was easily accomplished; (f) when the school principal was cooperative; and (g) when the resource room was in the same school as the pupil. Awareness of the requirements for effective resource room placement will enable participating professionals to make administrative and program changes based on these requirements.

FTE FUNDING

In the opinions of directors, principals and supervisors, FTE funding was causing definite problems for SLD programs in Florida, and particularly in small districts. The respondents agreed that FTE funding (a) discouraged consultation between the SLD teacher and the regular classroom teacher; (b) detracted from conscientious evaluations of pupils before placement is made; (c) encouraged a pupil-teacher ratio which is too great, and (d) inhibited the establishment of SLD classes in rural and/or small schools where fewer children are identified. An analysis of the data showed that respondents from small districts reported more problems with FTE funding than did the respondents from medium and large districts.

Many principals expressed the concern that FTE funding encouraged over-crowded SLD classes. The alternative to over-crowded classes requires that SLD teachers work with more groups of children, having fewer children in each group. If the SLD teacher sees more groups of children each day she has almost no time for consultation with the regular classroom teacher. Effective mainstreaming necessitates communication between the special teacher and the

classroom teacher. Mainstreaming may be weakened by a funding system which allocates money to a school on the basis of the number of instructional contact hours a pupil has in a special education class.

A supervisor wrote that FTE funding did not adequately support the SLD teacher with equipment and materials. This supervisor also reported that FTE funding adversely affected instructional grouping. By adverse affects of FTE funding on instructional groupings, this supervisor implied that teachers were expected to work with groups which were too large to facilitate remediation.

Another supervisor was concerned with the numbers of pupils on waiting lists for SLD classes. This supervisor considered the waiting lists to be illegal in light of mandatory legislation for exceptional pupils. The supervisor believed that the waiting lists were partially caused by a funding system which uses a previous year's spending to determine the financial outlay for the next year. There is an apparent contradiction between mandatory legislation for exceptional students and funding based on a previous year's spending.

CONCLUSIONS

The SLD eligibility criteria used in Florida school districts should continue to be used and clarified in order to standardize identification and placement procedures. Although there is some question as to the reliability of the assessment tools used to determine eligibility (Divoky, 1974), their use can be made more beneficial if they are supplemented with the analysis of behavioral characteristics as described by Hallahan and Cruickshank (1973) who stressed the point that the behavior of the child should dictate the methods and materials teachers used with them.

The Florida 1-2 percent prevalence rate for SLD pupils should be increased to at least 3 percent in order to coincide with the existing prevalence rates as reported by the directors and supervisors in this study. An increase of the prevalence rate to 3 percent would still be in agreement with the suggested rate of 1-3 percent made by the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (1968).

The training of SLD teachers should prepare them to assume responsibilities in testing and consultative work, as well as insure their competency in instructional techniques. Teachers who have not been trained to administer educational tests in their university preparation, should be trained to give them in supervised workshops. If the SLD teacher is trained to administer educational tests for assessment purposes, she is in a better position to serve as a consultant to other in-school personnel.

More properly trained SLD teachers and resource rooms should be provided in order to accommodate those pupils who are on waiting lists for SLD placement in Florida school districts. Ideally resource rooms should be in every school. This study indicated that many principals believed that pupils with specific learning disabilities should receive resource services in their own schools. Educational opportunities for SLD pupils would be more equitable if resource rooms were available in every school.

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